

A WAR NOT FORGOTTEN

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WAR STORIES ABOUND DURING FIGHTER PILOTS' RETURN TO SOUTH KOREA



Retired Col. Harold Fischer, a Korean War double ace who shot down 10 enemy aircraft, struggles to make it to the top of the steps of the Seoul National Cemetery in South Korea.

He bends over to use a slightly raised cement banister for support because he refuses to bring his walking cane. His 82-year-old legs don't cooperate sometimes, so he is usually the last in his group to reach a destination.

When he arrives at the top of the steps, the former prisoner of war sits on a cement step, dressed in his coat and tie, while the other seven Korean War veterans touring with him take center stage in a wreath-laying ceremony.

Other veterans from organizations in Hawaii and the Philippines offer him assistance so he can participate, but he waves them off. If he can't get up on his own, he'd rather stay on the fringe of the ceremony than accept help.

Stretched out across the rolling hills of the cemetery — the equivalent of the U.S. Korean War Veteran's Memorial — white crosses mark the final resting place of some 160,000 South Koreans. More than 54,000 Americans died in the war and more than 8,000 are still missing in action. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs estimates there are still three million Korean War veterans alive of the 6.8 million who served there from 1950 to 1953.

After the ceremony, Colonel Fischer joins the seven other visitors for a group picture. Cameras click like machine guns because the men who pose with him are retired Col. Hoot Gibson, an F-86 Sabre fighter ace; retired colonel and former astronaut Buzz Aldrin — the second man on the moon and a former F-86 pilot credited with two MiG-15 Fagot kills; and retired Lt. Gen. Charles Cleveland, an F-86 pilot with four kills and two "half" kills.

Everybody in the group is a former fighter pilot. They returned to South Korea to visit with U.S. troops serving on the divided peninsula on the eve of the Air Force's 60th anniversary. And they returned so they could help Americans remember a forgotten war — a war still fresh in the minds of the retired Airmen.

Air-to-air war

On June 25, 1950, about 135,000 North Korean troops stormed across the 38th parallel that divided the two countries in a surprise attack aimed at uniting a country divided since 1948. By August, the North Korean invasion had driven the American, South Korean and other allied forces into a small area around the southern port city of Pusan. In the air, the communists used propeller-driven aircraft and, initially, outnumbered the allied air forces. But despite the odds, Air Force, Navy and Marine Corps flyers started a massive air campaign.

Once more forces started to arrive, the allied air forces destroyed the North Korean air force in less than a month, said General Cleveland, who is from Montgomery, Ala.

But in November 1950, about a half million Chinese troops joined the war. Chinese and Russian pilots pushed back American troops and, flying new Soviet MiG-15 Fagots, gained temporary air control of the famed "MiG Alley," over American F-80 Shooting Star jets. But the arrival of American F-86 Sabre jets in December

Retired Maj. Gen. Carl G. Schneider (second from right) and retired Philippines Gen. Vic Azada (second from left) honor the lost men and women of the Korean War with a moment of silence after a wreath-laying ceremony at the South Korean National Cemetery attended by more than 200 war veterans and family members Sept. 12. The South Korean government's Revisit Korea program invites war veterans each year to come to South Korea to honor the men and women from 21 countries who served during the Korean War. Nearly 25,000 veterans have participated in this program since 1975.

helped turn the tide against the MiGs. Though disputed by some, the Air Force claims American fighters had a 10 to 1 aerial kill advantage over the North by war's end.

But there was no disputing that, pound for pound, the Sabre was a good match for the MiG. In sky over the Yalu River that separates China from North Korea, the two fighters tangled over MiG Alley. That is where air battles were won and lives lost.

As a first lieutenant, Colonel Fischer shot down his first enemy fighter on Nov. 26, 1952, and then became a fighter ace on Jan. 24, 1953, when he shot down his fifth plane. He did that in only 47 missions. He became a double ace on his 70th mission.

But getting the kills wasn't easy. The colonel recalls that on April 7, 1953, he accepted a plane that had not been bore sighted, so when he fired his six .50 caliber machine guns at enemy fighters, his shots were 200 feet to the right.

"The aircraft was given to me because there were no spares and I had only myself to blame, for I had accepted it," Colonel Fischer said.

Before he could adjust to compensate for the off-kilter bore sight, four MiGs jumped him. The colonel shook them off, managed to get behind them and chased them to China. His wingman was low on fuel, so the colonel told him to head for home. But the colonel continued the attack.

By now, three MiGs remained, two in front and a straggler. The colonel set his sights on the straggler, but then switched to the number two MiG-15. Lining up behind him, he let loose a burst of machine-gun fire that hit the MiG's single engine.

Once the crippled MiG dropped back, Colonel Fischer lined up with the lead aircraft.

Flying with one hand on the throttle and one on the stick, he squeezed the trigger and let loose all six machine guns, tearing the MiG apart. He saw rounds hit the jet and pieces flying off.

Debris flew back toward the F-86, forcing Colonel Fischer to duck. He had two choices: Fly under the MiG, or go over it. He flew over it.

Retired (left to right) Lt. Gen. Charles G. Cleveland, Maj. Gen. Carl G. Schneider, Col. Ralph Gibson, Col. Buzz Aldrin, Col. Pete Carpenter, Col. Ken Shealy, Col. Harold Fischer and Col. Robert Moxley answer questions at an Air Force call with nearly 150 Airmen at Yongsan Army Garrison, South Korea.



Retired Col. Harold Fischer (left) reminisces about duty during the Korean War with Donald Krueger, a bomb loader the colonel had not seen in 55 years. The two met by chance during a tour of the Demilitarized Zone by several groups of Korean War veterans.

At about the same time, the throttle came back into his hand — the engine was dying. His speed declined so rapidly he strained against his shoulder straps.

He could reach the mouth of the Yalu River, but the F-86 wasn't known for its ability to ditch into water. In his book, "Dreams of Aces," Colonel Fischer describes what happened next, in the incidents that led up to his capture.

"I decided to risk it, until I smelled and saw smoke coming into the cockpit," he said. "Fire, the dread of all pilots. If I wanted to live, I had no choice except to bail out, for the aircraft would probably blow up. Reaching down for the left handle, I jettisoned the canopy.

"With the right handle pulled up, I leaned back in the seat, put my feet in the stirrups and squeezed the trigger. The altitude was 2,000 feet and the airspeed, 450 knots."

When he landed, a Chinese man he thought might be friendly led him to Russian soldiers, who eventually handed him over to the Chinese. He was a prisoner of war. When the Korean War

cease fire ended the shooting war in 1953, the Chinese changed his status to political prisoner. The Chinese didn't release him until 1955, two years after the end of hostilities.

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It wasn't until 52 years later that he was able to return to the country for which he fought.

"I'm just lucky I'm alive," Colonel Fischer said, reflecting on his life. "So many people are dead. Perhaps the greatest pilot in the world was killed on his first mission."

Returning to calm

In remembrance of the 60th anniversary of the Air Force, the fighter pilots returned to what is known as the "Land of the Morning Calm," a maxim that would have been ludicrous 55 years ago.

"It took a lot of hard work to get them [veterans] here, but worth it because the eight who came back inspired our Airmen — inspired by the opportunity to get to know them, to hear their stories," Maj. Gen. Stephen Sargeant said. The general commands the Air Force Operational Test and Evaluation Center, Kirtland Air Force Base, N.M.

The general has known many of the veterans for years. So he invited them to take part in Air Force 60th anniversary events at several locations in South Korea.

"It's a great opportunity to thank them," he said. The thanks not only came from Koreans, but also "from the Airmen who live today in their legacy, carrying on a proud tradition."

The group joins more than 24,200 American Korean War veter-



Korean War veteran and Apollo 11 astronaut retired Col. Buzz Aldrin recounts how he shot down two MiG-15 Fagots with his F-86 Sabre during the war.

ans who have returned to South Korea in recent years to revisit a place where they lost close friends and built strong friendships and lasting memories.

"Sometimes one visit doesn't bring closure for them," said John Sullivan, an Air Force historian from the Pentagon who chronicled the veterans' tour. "They lost very, very close friends as young





men. They need to return to a country where they fought, where they lost friends in combat. They need to see that it wasn't in vain."

During the week-long tour in September 2007, Colonel Fischer occasionally wore a jacket with a "blood chit" sewed on the back. A blood chit displays messages aimed at civilians that ask them to help servicemembers shot down in combat get back to friendly forces. He wore the blood chit like a Native American Indian wears an eagle feather — with pride.

The men visited some of the bases — like Osan Air Base — from where they flew combat missions and chatted with the Airmen who today help maintain the peace on the peninsula. Today's Airmen live a lot better than their Korean War predecessors.

"We were in Quonset huts," said Colonel Aldrin, a second lieutenant during the war. "We had our own little cubbyhole where you could sit down and sort of have a desk and a bed."

In between interviews with the international media, the veterans also met the director of the Korean Revisit Program, Park Rae-hyuk.

"We're thankful for the freedom and democracy we enjoy today," Mr. Park said. "We are grateful for the sacrifices made by these Korean War veterans."

Seeing South Korea's growth and prosperity firsthand showed the veterans that what they did more than a half a century ago — and paid for in blood, loss of friends, and for Colonel Fischer, loss of freedom — was not for nothing. The men know freedom and democracy comes at a price, a price they paid so many years ago. During the visit, they got to see the benefits of their service.

"My memories from 1952 were of destruction, devastation and death," General Cleveland said. "Of course I had read and heard about the transformation from the war years, but that's not the same as seeing it first hand. I was stunned — the outward economic signs were of course right up front and dazzling. But it was the confidence and purpose I saw in the people as they went about their daily lives that really affected me."

"To think that I may have played the tiniest role over 50 years ago in helping to make that happen — much like a grain of sand in the beach — was very rewarding to me," he said.

The return to South Korea also opened floodgates of memories dormant for decades.

"Simply sharing our individual wartime memories and experiences among our group reminded us of who we were," said retired Col. Pete Carpenter, of Tucson, Ariz. "However, it also brought back a flood of memories of how devastated South Korea and its people were in those years. Not the least of our thoughts concerned our comrades who didn't make it home. Visits to memorials were a sharp reminder of the cost of freedom," the former F-80 pilot said.

From the 26th floor of his luxury hotel, Colonel Fischer looked out over the expanse that is Seoul. His aged hands — knuckles large with arthritis — pressed against the cool window pane. Once flat and burned to the ground, today the city flourishes like a flower in the summer rain.

Because World War II and the Vietnam War are popular book-ends to the Korean War, many call the war that happened in the two Koreas the "Forgotten War."

For Colonel Fischer and the other seven men who returned to where they fought, the Korean War is a conflict they will never forget, in a country they will always remember. ♡

Retired Col. Harold Fischer, a fighter ace with 10 confirmed kills, looks out over the city of Seoul, South Korea, Sept. 10. He toured South Korea with fellow veterans in observance of the Air Force's 60th anniversary.